

Part 1: Shigeru Miyamoto speaks about September 1999

Miyamoto gives some insight on how he "puts out fires" at Nintendo and how it relates to Japanese baseball.



Itoi: Hello everyone. I know you've all been waiting a long time for an update. I'm happy to inform you that today marks the start of a new addition to this site, "Secret Fortress in the Treetops!"

On a hot and sunny September day, I travelled to Kyoto and met with Shigeru Miyamoto, now a producer at Nintendo. It's been a whole year since his interview for *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time*, and this marks the first AND last exclusive interview with him for 1999! As always, Miyamoto-san has plenty to discuss and share with the world from Kyoto.

It turns out that Miyamoto-san is quite the Giants fan, and that's where our discussion begins...

(Translator's note: The Yomiuri Giants are a Japanese professional baseball team based in Tokyo.)

Miyamoto: It's been a while since I visited your office about half a year ago, hasn't it? How have you been? I'll have to leave temporarily in about 30 minutes - is that all right? I haven't been called by the CEO directly or anything, but there's someone who'd feel more at ease with me in the room. Apologies in advance.

Oh, by the way - thanks for that 1101.com T-shirt you sent. I should have worn it today!

So, Itoi-san, how are you? I read one of your recent articles, "When Itoi Was All the Rage." It was good. Part of me did think, "So you're really going to lay it all out there, huh?" - but I get that you wanted to make it all known. You just went all out. Since I haven't seen you in a while, I felt I was pretty lucky that I do get to see you and talk with you when I can.

(Translator's note: "When Itoi Was All the Rage" is an article that Itoi-san wrote talking about the stark contrast between how easy it is to get work in the Japanese entertainment industry when you're enjoying your 15 minutes of fame, versus when you're not.)



What were you saying about the Giants? That you're disappointed in them? Me? Well, as for me - lately working as a Project Manager or Director, I feel like the majority of the job is preventing fires from starting. And then you get all these evaluations based on the results, right? And the majority of that ends up being that you don't really get credit for preventing those fires from starting. But that's to be expected, isn't it? I mean, you've prevented those fires from happening so no one can see with their own eyes that they've been prevented.

But if you go and focus on doing that because you've still been praised overall, the next time it still all comes down to whether you're handling all those things that can't be seen by anyone else, just as it had been previously. And so you continue to get all this flattery since everything is going fine, and that's when you start to feel like that is your track record. Then maybe for the next job you get back down into the trenches and after a while you realize that you're still focusing on doing all of this work that's going to prevent fires. And so that's where I was, and there I realized for the first time that, "Oh, this is what my real job is!" (Laughs)

Part of me feels like it all comes down to whether this kind of thing is getting done or not.

So the reason that I never leave the trenches is because when I do, I start feeling like everything I'm saying is just theory. For instance, part of me doesn't like being asked to speak at seminars because in those kinds of settings I end up trying to sound well-spoken and am very careful about how I organize the information I'm attempting to get across. There's no "warmth" in that, y'know? Although looking back and organizing the information you have is incredibly important. But then the next thing you're going to do is repeat that process of trying to prevent fires from happening.

Looking at Nagashima-san's baseball managing, he doesn't pay any attention to trying to "prevent fires," and because of that yesterday the rug was pulled right out from underneath his feet. I just thought to myself, "Don't you WANT to win?" (Laughs)

Of course, being his last stand I wanted to cheer him on. Even if they did somehow come from behind in the 11th hour and everyone goes crazy screaming about the miracle they pulled off, saying this team was destined to win from the beginning and then calling that a miracle - then in that case they were just having an off season until then. The problem existed way before all the drama started, y'know? What a disappointment! While they did win the day before yesterday, from the manager's point of view - that's just unacceptable.

A little while back there was a game where they used eight pitchers. During that game I explained to my kid about how the world revolves around continuous probabilities. Cause, y'know, he's in his second year of middle school now. (Laughs)



I told him, "When you're doing something - looking at it like a baseball batting average, you'd say that you'll succeed once in every three tries. That doesn't mean that the more you try the better - that means that you're that much more likely to fail. So on your next try you need to figure out ahead of time how low you can minimize whatever damage you might take on before going through with it." I kept saying this again and again as I was watching Nagashima-san. (Laughs)

It's not a matter of how many runs have been scored, it's that he pays no thought to the psychological damage of the players. He just changes the pitchers, one after another, plain and simple. It's not that it's going to get more interesting because of the way he switches out pitchers, but that there's a 50 percent chance the starting pitcher will be successful. Basically, then, you don't change pitchers if the current one is hot. It's the same way with our CEO. He says, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it!" But Nagashima-san, whether things are going well or not, will constantly switch players in and out. And when he's not changing the lineup, he doesn't do

anything that needs to be done. And it's mostly just constant repetition of that.

Stuff like, "Why didn't you put in a pinch runner there?" He'll switch out the fourth batter without a second thought, and he'll force a player to squeeze bunt, even though this might be the time they really slug one. During these crucial moments he constantly makes these decisions, where it's like, "If that works out for you it's all well and good, but if it doesn't you've lost everything!"

But enough about the Giants.

So, (the year) 2000. Nintendo's got nothing to commemorate it - the CEO hates that kind of thing. He's the kind of guy that says, "What's so special about anniversaries?" Plus, we're not the kind of company to put something together in a rush, throw a new paint job on whatever's trending and try to make a quick buck off of it, saying, "Look, it's the 2000 model!"

For us, 2000 is what comes after 1999. That's what the year 2000 is to us.

I came back from a trip to England recently. They say that it's unlucky to ride a plane on September 9 (9/9) so I changed my flight to September 10. I tend to take those kinds of things seriously. I feel that in the world, there are these crossroads where an accident could happen or it doesn't, and there are things that are a result of that, so I feel like maybe I've gotten by because I tend to watch out for those little things usually. Stuff like - do I step on a manhole with my right foot or my left foot. Or when I was in elementary school I might switch feet as I was walking. But then someone might tell me that they feel a bad omen or something. (Laughs) I'm glad nothing bad happened in those days.

According to Iwata-san, various test programs use September 9, 1999 (9/9/1999) as a test date - not that computers are expected to malfunction on that day or anything. Not that an airplane or control tower malfunction, but maybe the reservation program would bug out and due to over booking I wouldn't be able to get on the plane, or maybe my hotel reservation would suddenly be cancelled and I wouldn't be able to check-in, that kind of thing. Of course when changing my reservation, it then became a matter of whether I risk not being able to check into my hotel, or not being able to find another open flight at all.

That aside, I made my visit to Europe. Let me tell you - the (N)64 isn't doing so well. But looking at Nintendo overall, we still have the Game Boy, and we're an established company - we've been around a long time. I went for a trade-show, and although everyone there was mass media, we still got a really positive response.

The exhibition floor was small. Maybe about half the space of what was being used at Makuhari the other day. Thirty different companies all showing in that space, all with their machines lined up, packed like sardines. Pretty much everyone there was from our industry, so even with my name tag off I'd get pulled aside and asked for an autograph. So I'd think, "Ah, what the hell?" and happily sign away, but then if I didn't finish writing for the first person before the next came, another two people would come while signing that one, and before I knew it there'd be no escape. This was also the first time I couldn't even get out of the hotel.

But you know, the interviews, they were all really positive. The rough questions all went to (Howard) Lincoln, one of our higher ups. But everyone was incredibly nice to me! (Laughs)



This was the first time for me to visit a show in Europe. In fact, Nintendo only started full on exhibition for this show just last year, so this is only our second year. There are a lot of different countries in Europe that Nintendo sells its games in, and all of these reporters from various famous magazines from all over Europe - Finland, Norway - note that it's incredibly rude to countries like The Netherlands and Belgium to assume that Europe is just Germany, France and England - as well as game-specific magazines were there. And there would be people that are just incredibly passionate as they ask their questions, who I would find out are working for our official publications. (Laughs) I'd then get a card from them that says in plain letters - "Nintendo."

For most everyone I met, it was our first time meeting, so they would be happy just to get a chance to meet. Their questions were all really nice, too. When there was a lull in the conversation they would ask, "How do you feel about the way the industry has grown in your 20 years of making games?" It was a lot of fun, felt like I was on a goodwill tour.

Itoi: Currently there's less than three months left in 1999, which has been quite an exciting year. As we look toward 2000, there's still plenty I want to ask Miyamoto-san, and as I greedily fire shot after shot at him he politely accepts the questions and responds. And you can look forward to more of

his meticulous, interesting monologues in the next part of our discussion. You say you want to hear about Dolphin? Well, we're not quite to that part yet.